

8. Delivery

Taken together, these proposals imply a modern, integrated employment and benefits service which:

- is able to provide a flexible, tailored service – drawing together the elements of support that best meet the needs of the individual;
- is attuned to the realities of family life in the 21st century – expects parents to take shared responsibility for their children and is able to take a family focus rather than solely focusing on the benefit claimant;
- is attuned to the local labour market, the demand for skills and the expectations of employers;
- is able to act as a ‘broker’ between jobseeker and employer to find solutions to barriers to entering, remaining and advancing in work;
- goes beyond a simple ‘work first’ approach to help individuals get the right job that makes the most of their potential and gives them the best chance of earning a decent wage;
- supports those who are in work to advance; and
- reaches out to those who would benefit from support but are not currently part of existing Welfare to Work programmes, including the inactive and potential second earners.

These characteristics imply major changes for Jobcentre Plus at a time when its future role has already been subject to some speculation.⁷²

Private and voluntary sector organisations are already being invited to play a much greater role in the delivery of Welfare to Work services, under the roll-out of the Pathways to Work programme. Such organisations may well be better placed to carry out some of the functions outlined above, although there has been no assessment of the capacity of these sectors to deliver such services. Other government bodies also share responsibility for supporting parents to attain the skills that will help them prosper in the labour market and employers also have an important role to play. The delivery of this agenda cannot be met by Jobcentre Plus alone.

It is possible to envisage, in future, either a narrow focus for Jobcentre Plus – which primarily consists of assessing eligibility and contracting other providers to deliver services – or a much broader, expanded role which encapsulates the characteristics listed above. Alternatively, Jobcentre Plus may need to move to a ‘broker’ role, focusing on providing customers with a single gateway into a system that draws on the range of support, advice and guidance available to jobseekers in the local community, little of which would be provided directly by Jobcentre Plus itself. This would

⁷² House of Commons Select Committee, 2006, *The Efficiency Savings Programme in Jobcentre Plus*, Second Report of Session 2005/06.

involve strengthening Jobcentre Plus' partnerships with organisations that are better able to broker packages of support for parents.

These are fundamental questions about the delivery of a major part of the welfare state – the support offered to out-of-work and low-income families. It also brings into focus the responsibilities of employers towards their employees and begs the question of where the state's responsibility for employees' progression in work ends and that of employers begins. But whatever the conclusion about the future role for Jobcentre Plus, there is little doubt that change will be necessary if the child poverty targets are to be met.

Recommendations

- 30. The Department for Work and Pensions' plans for the future of Jobcentre Plus should take into account the need for a stronger 'family' focus, the need for more flexibility between programmes and the need to reach more families in order to tackle child poverty.**
- 31. It is clear that, if the policy proposals being explored were to be implemented, some would need to be piloted first. There may even be grounds for more devolved solutions to specific challenges (such as in London). The City Strategy pilots may provide an opportunity to test out some innovative ideas.**